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BEFORE THE FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION WASHINGTON, D.C. 20054

In the matter of)	OFFICE OF SECRETARY
Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service)))	CC Docket No. 96-45
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REPLY COMMENTS OF ITCs IN RESONSE TO THE COMMISSIONS'
REQUEST FOR COMMENT ON THE FEDERAL-STATE JOINT BOARD
RECOMMENDED DECISION ON UNIVERSAL SERVICE

January 10, 1997

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SUMMARY

ITCs submits these Reply Comments on behalf of the rural telecommunications providers it serves. This proceeding and its results are utmost critically important to the rural Local Exchange Carriers serving sparsely populated and harsh geography of the Mid-west and Rocky Mountain regions of the United States. These companies would not exist nor would their customers be served were it not for the support process that has been inherent in the provision of telecommunications services for over a century.

The Federal-State Joint Board Recommended Decision is a well intentioned product that clearly reflects enormous effort by the Joint Board members and staff representatives. However, the FCC must recognize that if implemented the Recommendend Decision will become a major contributor to the degradation of rural service unless it is modified by the FCC's report, order and rules.

The principle of competitive neutrality is a critical and positive element in the Recommendation; however, certain steps employed to ensure neutrality will not contribute to the success of the process. The imposition of a freeze using retroactive data leaves the rural telephone service provider without a means of recovering costs incurred during the interim and therefor, violates the "specific, predictable and sufficient" requirements of the 1996 Act. Further, the absence of a reasonable means of recovery also brings into question the "takings" prohibition contained in the Fifth Amendment of the United States Constitution.

The same can be said for the use of forward looking costs and the use of proxy models when they produce hypothetical costs that do not reflect past, present or future reality.

In terms of supported services, the lack of support for second lines and, eventually, business services prejudices the rural consumer in that the cost of these services will no longer be conducive to their use. This severely limits access to needed resources and the long term viability of the rural business community. It likewise, violates the Act's principle of comparable services and rates between rural and urban areas.

As indicated above, ITCs is concerned about the potential abandonment of plant and in consequence thereof offers a means of recovery. In addition, there remain concerns over the potential differences in composition between large and small company USF service areas and the potential inequities that may result.

Finally, ITCs has recommended a universal service cost and distribution system that is usage sensitive and, therefore lowers the USF requirement as usage (and revenues) increase.

In conclusion, ITCs remains concerned about the direction the Recommendations are taking the USF. But, nevertheless, ITCs believes that, with modifications, the ultimate USF program will meet the intended goals and objectives of universal service public policy.

BEFORE THE FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION WASHINGTON, D.C. 20054

In the matter of)	
)	
Federal-State Joint Board on)	CC Docket No. 96-45
Universal Service)	

REPLY COMMENTS OF ITCs IN RESPONSE TO THE COMMISSIONS' REQUEST FOR COMMENT ON THE FEDERAL-STATE JOINT BOARD RECOMMENDED DECISION ON UNIVERSAL SERVICE

ITCs, Inc., an economic cost consultant to independent telephone companies serving America's rural areas, including Chariton Valley Telephone Company, Columbine Telephone Company, Cunningham Telephone Company, DeKalb Telephone Cooperative, Inc., ETEX Telephone Cooperative, Mokan Dial, Inc.- Kansas, Mokan Dial, Inc.-Missouri, Moultrie Independent Telephone Co., Inc., South Central Telecommunications of Kiowa, South Central Telephone Association - Oklahoma, Steelville Telephone Exchange, Inc., Tri-County Telephone Association, Inc., TCT West, Inc., and Wiggins Telephone Association, by counsel, respectfully submit reply comments on the Recommended Decision of the Federal-State Joint Board on Universal Service to the Commission adopted November 7, 1996 and solicited by Public Notice DA 96 1891 released November 18,1996 as follows:

Background

- 1. As indicated in ITCs comments in this matter, the importance of high quality telecommunications services to the rural Mid-west and Rocky Mountain region can not be understated. Quality and affordable servoce is there today because of universal service policies adopted by the industry, pursued as public policy and now codified by the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Absent this approach, and the support it provided, this Nations' role as the economic leader of the world would never have been achieved nor would the rural American way of life or standard of living ever have been attained.
- 2. Yet, now, well intentioned recommendations of the Joint Board threaten the very cornerstone of this element of our society in a manner that could cause significant deterioration in the quality of service and the lives of rural Americans. One need only examine the deregulatory efforts in modern history to see that the end result in rural America has had just the affect that is feared the most by ITCs and others in this proceeding. Indeed as pointed out in ITCs' comments, many rural providers have dramatically reduced construction programs as a result of the doubts cast by the Joint-Board recommendation.
- 3. This was not the intent of Congress nor is it the will of the American people. Our citizens demand, and are entitled to, an orderly well thought out process of implementation that recognizes the importance of telecommunications, the impact on all Americans and the failures of past deregulatory programs.
 - 4. It is to that end that the following comments are offered.

Competitive Neutrality

- 5. ITCs totally supports the concept of competitive neutrality as a fundamental underlying principle in the administration of universal service public policy and in the design and implementation of rules that will bring that policy to reality. However, in support of Ameritech's comments (at page II.), the Recommendations fail to recognize the role of the carrier of last resort, past, present and future, and to equalize the burdens between them and prospective new entrants. It is not that incumbents should be favored or given a special place in telecommunications history; but only that the very policy of competitive neutrality apply equally to them. The obvious bias against incumbents is not appropriate, legal, or befitting of the regulatory process.
- 6. Accordingly, the Commission should take steps to recognize the obligations of COLRs, the risks that they undertake and the costs incurred in fulfilling that vital role. Until this takes place, the principle of competitive neutrality will not rise to the intended level of importance, meaning or reality envisioned by the Joint Board.

The USF Support Freeze

7. As indicated by USTA (at page 29), the imposition of the freeze falls far short of the requirements of "specific, predictable and sufficient" support requirements of Section 254 (b)(5). Those ILECs involved in new construction and upgrades will not receive <u>sufficient</u> support for the efforts they have undertaken in 1996 or had planned to take in 1997. This retroactive approach is clearly a violation of past practice and precedent ("Hope" and "Dusquesne") and the 1996 Act.

- 8. These elements of the Recommendation have already had a negative impact. Mokan Dial Inc., for example, is re-examining the provision of services to a new subdivision and its ability to accommodate an area code change. Tri-County Telephone Association and TCT West are completing efforts in progress but will not proceed further. Steelville Telephone Exchange has dropped all further network development. In all cases these actions are being taken because of the uncertainty result directly from the Recommendation. This is not in the best interest of the industry or the consumer; yet, there is no other responsible choice. One must ask if this is really the outcome expected by consumers, Congress, the industry or the regulators.
- 8. While ITCs strongly advocates a continuation of the present process until such time as a proven alternative can be developed, the USTA approach, detailed in their comments (at pages 27-28), copy attached herein, could well serve as an interim alternative. It provides for a base period more current than the proposed recommendation, it allows for consideration of upgrades and new construction and it accommodates sales, mergers and acquisitions. Adoption of such an approach will bring rules resulting from the Recommendation into compliance with the plain language of the 1996 Act.

Forward Looking Costs

9. Also in the name of competitive neutrality is the proposed use of forward looking costs. Since when does Wall Street provide capital, since when do consumers buy, since when do suppliers provide materials and labor based on hypothetical costs? Suggesting such to the salesperson at Sears the next time one purchases a Kenmore washer might elicit an interesting response. Practically speaking, the use of hypothetical costs usually results in a "fine,

imprisonment or both" (with all due respect to the Department of Justice economists). Finally, hypothetical costs are arbitrary and as such are governed by the entity that does the arbitration.

10. ITCs supports the views offered by SBC (at pages ii and iii), USTA (at page 12), Ameritech (at page 12) and others, that use of forward looking costs is not suitable for determination of supported cost levels. The determination should be based on the actual costs of providing for universal service; in other words, factual information. It is the best means of insuring that funds were used as intended, that funds are not provided when no longer necessary, that carriers not are deprived of the recovery of their costs, that false signals are not sent to new entrants and, most importantly, that the consumer is receiving comparable service at comparable rates. Use of actual costs will also best meet the requirements of "specific, predictable and sufficient" support. We urge the commission to reconsider this position.

Proxy Models

11. The use of a Proxy model is also intended to ensure competitive neutrality; yet, as SBC so effectively demonstrates (at pages 26-30), the disparity between the two proposed models, and between the models and actual costs clearly reflect the current "state of the art". Therefor, to advocate this approach at this time violates the "predictable" requirement of the Act, reflects a lack of concern for rural consumers who must wait until their provider can prudently resume upgrades and provide new systems, and opens the doors of litigation as companies defend their property under the "takings" provisions of the Constitution.

Supported Services

Residence Service

12. ITCs agrees with those who question the wisdom of limiting support to a single line. First, the Act makes specific reference to the principle of providing comparable services at comparable rates in referencing high cost rural subscribers' services compared to urban services. Limiting supported services to a single line forces a rate for a second line to a level that is clearly not comparable to second lines in an urban areas. This prejudice against the rural subscriber goes far beyond the intent of Congress and actually results in a withdrawal of an existing supported service. Further, second lines are often used to extend the research capability of the rural student to a level comparable to that of urban students. Due to distances and transportation requirements, the rural student can not simply stay after school or drop in to the local library on the way home. Thus a second line is often the only means of access to library material, the vast resources of the Internet and the analysis of current events that are readily available to the urban population. Simply stated, the need for a second line is often greater in rural areas; yet under the Recommendation's approach it could well become unaffordable.

Business Services

13. A similar bias against the business consumer is also reflected in the recommendation. Here again, communications services are the cornerstone of economic success which, in turn, are vital element in the rural standard of living. To not support these services in high cost areas clearly limits not only business development but the economic viability of existing commercial

enterprises as well. Nowhere in the Act, the underlying Conference Report or in any public policy related to small businesses is this the intended result.

14. Limiting the lines eligible for support in high cost areas will leave the cost of supplemental lines unaffordable and will discourage usage which, in turn, will limit the decline in the cost per unit of traffic. Further, the end result will complicate the intra-state pricing and tariff development process beyond recognition. Finally, as mentioned above, all past deregulation programs resulted in a degradation of services in rural America. These approaches by the Joint Board will certainly doom the quality of rural telecommunications service to the same fate if corrective action is not taken in the development of rules.

Advanced Services

15. The Joint Board found that the educational, library and health care elements of society warrant support for advanced services while also finding that the family home and the economic facets of society should be denied support for these same services. Not only does this violate the comparable service at comparable cost principle, it denies rural populations access to information and services that are only "down the block" or "across the street" in the urban world. If indeed, the Act, the Recommendations and the rules are intended to compensate for the barriers of distance and density faced by rural Americans; if indeed, the intent is to not separate the population in to "haves and have nots" then this aspect of the Recommendation must be reconsidered and changed.

Administrative Burdens

16. In the attempt to "fine tune" business and residence line support eligibility, the issue of administrative burden must also be taken into consideration. The monitoring of lines into a residence to determine if it is a second line or a primary line for a second resident, the determination of "second" homes and the isolation of single lines terminating in multiple answering arrangements are all examples of the administrative nightmare that may lie ahead. Surely this was not the intent behind the Act and the Joint Board effort.

Cost Recovery

- 17. Of great concern to those who may become subject to use of forward looking costs, the freeze and the use of proxy models, is the recovery of costs previously incurred but not yet recovered. The "takings" clause of the Fifth Amendment, as well as the results of the Hope and Dusquesne cases clearly lay the foundation for the obligations of parties involved in the provision of services under regulation. At some point, the Commission must address the fulfillment of these obligation; yet time is running out.
- 18. If the past is any indication of the present situation, the difference between the level of costs incurred in a regulated environment and those involved in providing competitive services is such that, on balance, there may well be a requirement to clear certain assets from the accounts in order to operate competitively. The present direction of the Commission suggests this is the difference between embedded costs and the results of TELRIC studies or the proxy models derived therefrom.

- Incumbent Local Exchange Carrier presents the difference between their audited financial statements related to their investment accounts and either a TELRIC study or a proxy reflecting these same accounts. The difference would then be subject to recovery through Universal Service Fund support over a three year period. From that point forward, TELRIC investment costs (individual exchange carrier or proxy) would be used for USF purposes. During the interim, the basis of USF support would also be based on forward looking costs in order to not duplicate recovery of embedded costs. For example, if existing plant is 50% depreciated (on an economic basis) then the net book value of such plant would be compared to like TELRIC plant similarly depreciated and the difference subjected to the treatment outlined above. Similarly, if the remaining life of certain plant items is half of the original life but only 35% of the investment has been recovered, the 15% under depreciated amount should be added to the comparable difference outlined above in order to create the competitive neutrality that the principle demands.
- 20. An approach such as this might well solve the immediate problem, provide for specific, predictable and sufficient support and provide for the needs of rural America.

Study Area Size

21. The recommendation indicates that, for rural providers, the size of the geographical area applicable for USF purposes should be the present day Study Area but leaves variable the size of the applicable area for large companies. This may well result in an inequity in that present day Study Areas often incorporate a small urban area which, through averaging, lowers the cost per loop. If adjacent large company areas are not similarly constructed the end result

will be a disparity in support between the two areas. This is not equitable or consistent and requires modification.

<u>Universal Service Support Mechanism</u>

- 22. Attached to prior submissions in this and the precedent proceeding, ITCs submitted a proposal outlining a simplified mechanism for the determination and distribution of support funding. That proposal, modified to incorporate the Recommendations, could easily be used as the vehicle for support. Of importance is the fact that the proposal was usage sensitive in that, as usage increased the support requirement decreased. This provides incentives to increase interexchange usage and relieves fund pressure as ILEC-specific subscriber-generated revenues offset high cost burdens.
- 23. ITCs recommends the staff review the proposal for application in the present proceeding.

Conclusion

24. ITCs and its rural telephone company constituents remain extremely concerned about the direction the Joint Board Recommendation is leading the industry. The legal considerations, adherence to the intent of the 1996 Act and practical considerations dictate reconsideration and modification of several underlying cornerstones of the proposal. With these modifications, the process will certainly maintain and enhance the quality of telecommunications service, and

thereby the economic leadership of the United States, and accordingly, the well being of its people.

Respectfully submitted,

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January 10, 1997

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I,Tracy L. Trynock, hereby certify that on this 10th day of January, 1997, copies of the foregoing "Reply Comments of ITCs in Response to the Commissions' Request for Comment on the Federal-State Joint Board Recommended Decision on Universal Service" have been served by first-class United States mail, postage pre-paid, upon the following:

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